

A COMPARATIVE MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF PUNJAB COLLEGE ACTIVISM: FRAMING, PROTEST NARRATIVES, AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE ON INSTAGRAM

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Abstract

This research is a case study that focuses on how student activists and institutional forces used social media to construct public narratives during the Punjab College incident (2024). Drawing on Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974); Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), it analyzes ten activist posts and two posts of official statements from two social media platforms: X and Instagram. Activists referred to emotionally charged language, protest imagery, and hashtags for framing the incident as systemic injustice and evoking solidarity. Institutional responses, in contrast, utilized formal branding, denial, and procedural language in order to construct the event as misinformation and to facilitate reputation management. The findings are a clear indication of how powerful multimodal protest is in opposing institutional authority and how transparent and empathetic communication by educational institutions is significant. This research helps to develop an understanding of digital activism and institutional discourse in a Pakistani context.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The digital era has made use of social media a central tool for activism since it is effective for the quick sharing of information and gathering of support. This phenomenon was evidenced by the Punjab College activism incident that took place between October and December of 2024, where, allegedly, a security guard raped a college student in the basement in the periphery of Punjab College Lahore and fled the scene. The students claimed to have heard cries and seen the vehicles exporting the injured student, Student activists used such platforms as Instagram to bring into the light matters of sexual harassment, institutional neglect, and the overall patriarchal systems in the educational institutions. This case is a unique opportunity to discuss the phenomenon of multimodal discourse (the combination of text, images, and other semiotic resources).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although social media activism is becoming more widespread, there is a gap in analysing how multimodal elements are involved in framing narratives, especially in non- western contexts.

Although framing has been investigated to understand its place in social movements (Entman, 1993), little research has been done into how visual and textual elements collaborate in such spaces as Instagram to form alluring narratives. In addition, when faced with such activism, institutional responses tend to use strategic communication to protect reputations, and even though the dynamics between activist framing and institutional counter-framing are often unexplored (Jaworska, 2023).

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study intends to fill the above-mentioned gaps by examining multimodal discourse used by student activists and institutional actors within the Punjab College incident. By incorporating Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), the research creates a systematic mechanism for analysing the construction and spreading of protest narratives. An analysis of this nature is essential for understanding the mechanisms entailed in social media to fuel activism and how the institutions react to safeguard their image.

1.4 Research Objectives

The main aims of this research work are;

1. To analyse the linguistic means used by the student activists in framing the Punjab College incident as a claim for justice.
2. To study the process of coalescing between protest images and language to rally public support.
3. To examine the techniques of framing adopted by the official communications of Punjab College in response to the allegations.

1.5 Research Questions

The study attempts to investigate the following questions:

1. What linguistic tactics (e.g., framing, metaphors, emotional appeal) of student activists and their postings on Instagram help view the Punjab College incident as a clarion call for justice and accountability?
2. How do protest images and the language that is employed by student activists combine to represent public sentiments towards the incident?
3. In what way do official institutional social media replies and public statements construct their credibility?

1.6 Scope and Delimitations

This research employs purposive sampling, by selecting and examining 6 Instagram posts – 4 from the activists, and 2 from the Officials (CM Punjab and Punjab College accounts), during the period between October and December 2024. The study only concerns publicly available posts with the understanding that some of the content might have been deleted or changed. Although the findings provide an understanding of the case of Punjab College, the findings do not apply to all cases of social media activism.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction: Digital Activism and Institutional Discourses in Education

The social media has come to the fore as the key location for student activism, particularly, in

education-related controversies concerning power, justice, and institutional integrity. Activists now use a variety of multimodal communicative practices – linguistic, visual, and narrative – to fight official narratives and hold them accountable for their actions. This review is a synthesis of empirical research that examines the way such strategies are mobilized in student-led movements and how institutions create their counter-narratives through digital spaces. It specifically reviews multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as two major methodologies to open power, resistance, and representation.

2.2 Linguistic Strategies in Student Activism

Strategic language is used by activists to make urgent and moral clarity of their causes. Tactics like framing issues with the use of emotionally loaded words and terms such as metaphors, and personal narrative; categorizing us versus them have been commonplace (Mendelsohn et al., 2024; Imran & Raza, 2023). This is consistent with the diagnostic, prognostic, and motivation framing triad as propounded by Snow and Benford (1988), which is manifested in campaigns like #BlackLivesMatter (Tanksley, 2019) and #TellPearson (Hogan, 2018). In regard to education, digital campaigns tend to deploy rhetorical tactics exposing structural inequalities and positioning the institutions as complicit or negligent. For instance, Robertson (2021) demonstrates the turn of student activists in college campuses to counter narratives to challenge skin-deep diversity practices. The same is the case with Selvi (2020), who shows how Turkish student groups oppose English Medium Instruction (EMI) using the nationalist language, recontextualized quotations, and cultural metaphor in Facebook discourse. Such findings directly influence the study on linguistic framing in Punjab College activism.

2.3 Multimodal and Visual Strategies in Protest Communication

The introduction of visuals (images, videos, emojis, color schemes, and layout design) performs a significant role in terms of developing the emotional and ideological effect of digital activism. Neumayer and Rossi (2018) examined image use on Twitter during the Blockupy protests in Germany, and saw how, not only do images record dissent, but they also generate alternative narratives that question the established narratives of the dominant media. In the same way, Nurhabibah et al. (2023) analyzed a viral TikTok video and showed how gestures, expressions, and aesthetic choices serve socio-cultural messages, confirming or challenging gender norms. Instagram and other visual-first platforms support this phenomenon by allowing activists to create alternative protest aesthetic. In a study conducted by Madhu Narayanan and McCluskey (2023), they found black youths in charter schools used Instagram stories and posts to create “digital counter-stories”; a combination of visuals with emotionally loaded captions and carrying watermarks to resist institutional discrimination. Such multimodal practices connect to the protest materials posted by Punjab College students, namely, posters, reels, and video testimonials. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) model on the visual grammar becomes quite relevant here explaining how compositional elements such as gaze, angle, and color are combined with the text elements in order to produce the discourse of activism

2.4 Institutional Framing and Reputation Management

Institutional response to digital protest is less adversarial in nature as compared to activist discourse and more controlled, vague, and discursively framed. Research on universities’ social

media strategies shows “centripetal” model being prevalent commonly adopted by universities – broadcasting official narratives with minimal interactivity (Capriotti & Zeler, 2023). Such communications are about containment as opposed to engagement, particularly in instances of moral or ethical allegations crisis. Górska (2024) discussed the optimistic rhetoric and generic visuals that Polish universities used, amidst the COVID-19 crisis, to remain credible, although there are widespread interruptions. The same pattern can be identified by analyzing the corporate image repair campaigns that Jaworska (2023) examines, where such firms as Facebook and Wells Fargo built canonical narrative arcs – prioritizing the values of the community, diminishing their own role. Such narratives tend to underplay the “complication” aspect of a scandal and instead, emphasize on symbolic resolutions, a move that is evident from Punjab College’s subdued social media responses after charges of sexual assault.

2.5 Gaps and Research Relevance

Although the reviewed research offers deep insights into the activist and institutional communication, there are not many studies devoted to the South Asian or Pakistani context, and even fewer devoted to the digital discourse of gender-based violence or the student-led accountability movement in educational institutions. This research helps fill this gap by analyzing the Punjab College case through a dual MDA-CDA lens that meets the challenge of interrogating the activist discourse and institutional response on such platforms as Instagram.

3 Research Methodology

In the present study, a qualitative research design based on Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and Framing Theory is used to investigate the Punjab College activism incident portrayed on Instagram (between October and December 2024). The aim is to understand how the linguistic, visual, and symbolic resources were strategically employed to frame the incident by student activists and the institution with the use of MDA tools in close cooperation with the categories of Framing from the Framing Theory.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study examines the manner in which the Punjab College activism incident (October – December, 2024) was constructed, framed, and proliferated in social media platforms like Instagram by student activists and institutional actors. In order to critically analyze this process, the research utilizes two interconnected theoretical perspectives. Framing Theory and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA). Following the qualitative case study design, these frameworks are especially helpful in examining meaning-making practices in visually dense, emotionally charged, and ideologically polarized digital spaces.

The dataset contains 6 multimodal social media posts chosen by purposive sampling for their high engagement, according to the number of likes, number of shares, and the number of views. Because of state-based content deletion during and after the early stages of the protest, many activist posts were deleted. As a result, this study was able to use the most credible and most engaged with posts that were still accessible. These posts became the loci of public gaze and were influential in forming collective meaning and memory about the incident.

3.1.1 Framing Theory

Framing theory gives a basic tool for considering meaning development in the public discourse. First formulated by Erving Goffman (1974) and then developed further by Robert Entman (1993), framing theory assumes that speakers and media actors frame key features of some existing reality in such a way as to forward a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.

This study borrows from Entman's (1993) main four functions of framing.

- Problem Definition – What the problem is and why is it a problem.
- Causal Attribution – Identification of who or what is to blame for the issue.
- Moral evaluation – This means that one is judging either the actions or the subjects of the actions.
- Treatment Recommendation- Suggestions or call to actions.

3.1.2 Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Multimodal Discourse Analysis is necessary in comprehending the social media activism of the Punjab College incident since the material representing digital protests tends to contain images, videos, hashtags, and written captions. MDA, developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 2001), examines how the various systems of communication work out together to build the meaning.

Based on this framework, we espouse the following analytical principles markedly:

- Mode Interaction – the way text, visuals, audio and layout are interacted so as to convey unified messages.
 - Visual Grammar – how such elements as gaze, color, composition, and perspective affect meaning.
 - Salience and framing – what dominant visuals and text cues are used.
- Recontextualization – The way original or factual events are presented and altered through the use of semiotic options.

3.2 Data Collection

The set of data consists of 6 Instagram posts chosen through purposive sampling.

- 4 posts from the student activist accounts (Instagram)
- 2 posts of the official Punjab Group of Colleges account and the Government of Punjab.

All posts were retrieved manually from the period of the activism, involving the October to December 2024 period. This is an important time period because it illustrates the early response and public formulation of the event when narrative construction was most fluid and public.

Key criteria for selection included:

- High engagement: Posts that had the most number of likes, shares, views, and comments.
- Visibility: Publicly visible posts (many of them reportedly deleted by the government).
- Credibility: Posts re-posted by large student-led accounts and verified news or informative accounts.

Metadata included:

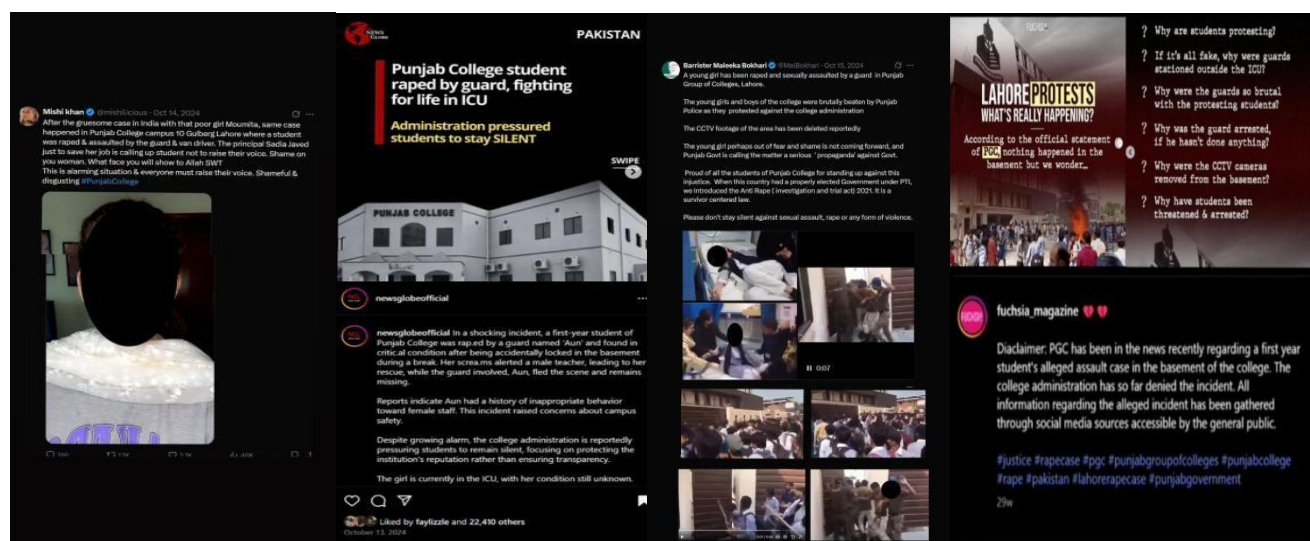
- Posting date and time
- Likes, shares, and view counts
- Image type
- Caption and hashtag content
- Engagement markers (such as emojis, mentions, tagged locations).

3.3 Ethical Considerations

All the data was accessed from publicly accessible platforms. Posts that show a person's face were anonymized or excluded unless they belonged to the collective or public representation. Considering that sexual harassment and student-initiated protest are sensitive issues, critical empathy and sensationalism avoidance are the main focal points for the study.

5 Data analysis and Findings

5.1 Overview of Collected Posts



5.1.1 Activist Posts: Key Themes and Engagement

The 4 Instagram activist posts given were posted between October 13 and October 16, 2024 and together make a compelling counternarrative to institutional quietness around the Punjab College sexual assault incident. These posts use an advanced mix of visual, linguistic, and strategic framing tactics to provoke general outrage, establish solidarity, and seek the responsibility of authorities.

The **newsglobeofficial** post (October 13, 2024), collecting more than 22,400 likes, is a representative example of the vividness and force of the rhetoric of the movement. The post has a

stark and calculated design: a grayscale image of the Punjab College building is depicted against a black background, and it creates a mournful and serious mood right away. The headline is written as *“Punjab College student raped by guard, fighting for life in ICU”* in bold white text while the subhead reads *“Administration pressured students to stay SILENT”* in yellow, immediately catching reader’s eyes as well as signifying the imposed silence. This color contrast not only makes the visual more salient but also enhances the central charge of the post that institutional power is being deployed to stifle truth.

This framing is furthered with an accompanying caption that is armed with a detailed, emotionally laden story. In a shocking incident, a first-year student of Punjab College was raped by a guard called *“aun”* and found in a critical condition after being accidentally locked up in the basement during a break. Her screams attracted a male teacher and this saved her rescue, while one of the guards involved, Aun, fled the scene and is vanished. The language is rough and unwavering, with such expressions as *“shocking incident”*, *“critical condition”*, *“her screams”* bringing out the victim’s anguish and the seriousness of the matter. The event is further put into context with *“Reports indicate Aun had a history of inappropriate behavior toward female staff.”* This incident had raised the issue of campus safety. The narrative then switches to the attack on the administration. Despite rising alarms, the college administration is reported to be pressuring the students to stay silent in the name of rescuing the institution’s image at the expense of transparency. This direct condemnation has a diagnostic effect (it is a form of institutional silencing), blaming the administration, and it emphasizes the moral nature of the crisis.

The **fuchsia magazine** carousel post is in an investigative, critical form. Its opening slide, *“LAHORE PROTESTS: ”WHAT’S REALLY HAPPENING?”* is backdropped by a picture of students, protesting, smoke and fire are seen, the message is urgent and turbulent. Overlayed questions like *“If it’s all fake, why were guards outside the ICU?”* and *“Why were CCTV cameras removed from the basement?”* encourage the followers to evaluate the official narrative and the situation of cover-up. The caption of the photo reads, *“PGC has been in the news recently, due to the alleged assault case of a first-year student.... The college administration has until now denied the incident”*, places the post as being both a news and a call for critical reflection. The utilization of the hashtags (#justice, #rapecase, #punjabgroupofcolleges, #lahorerapecase) places the post in the wider discourse of activism and promotes digital solidarity.

The incident described in the post by barrister *Maleeka Bokhari* of October 15 shows the incident and its consequences in the English language where assault, police brutality to protesting students, erasing CCTV footage of the incident, and the claim of the government that pressured the government into dropping the case as propaganda. The post contains pictures of wounded students and fights with the police that actually support the argument of the severity of repression and institutional failure. It comes to an end with a motivational call. *“Do not stay mute against sexual assault, rape, or even violence of any kind”*.

Mishi Khan’s post equates the case to a current situation in India, denouncing the principal for silencing the voices of students and demanding a chorus of protest:

“After the gory incident that occurred in India with that poor girl Moumita, the same case happened in the campus of Punjab College 10 Gulberg Lahore where a student was raped and assaulted by the guard & van driver. The main Sadia Javed, only to save her job is calling up student not to raise their voice. Shame on you woman. What face you are going to present to

Allah SWT. This is scary scenario & people need to make noise. Shameful & disgusting #PunjabCollege."

Accompanied video of her calls, the nation to unite and stand strong on the side of truth as her words invoke religious feelings by repeating such comments, *"What face will you show to Allah SWT?"*.

In these posts, there are a number of recurring themes:

- Grief and Rage: Such phrases as "fighting for life in ICU" and "shocking incident" rub one's emotions in a communal tone of grief and fury.
- Solidarity: All the usage of collective language (students, "our sister", "we"), as well as hashtags, creates a feeling of a common goal and community.
- Feminist Resistance and Justice: The posts defy male and institutional silencing, directly pointing fingers at the administration for putting a good reputation above justice.

These posts illustrate framings strategies.

- Institutional silencing and cover up ("pressured students to stay SILENT," "protecting the institution's reputation rather than ensuring transparency").
- Protest, exposure and calling for an accountability are the solution ("students from other universities joining in, demanding justice and accountability").
- The posts appeal to emotionally-powered slogans and metaphors ("the game is huge," "takes nation by storm," "fighting for life") to spark the outrage and involvement.

5.2 Linguistic Framing Strategies (RQ1)

The linguistic moves in these posts are characterized by directness and emotional passion, with a tactful utilization of metaphors. Words such as *"shocking," "critical condition," "pressured to stay SILENT"* and *"mafia"* are not neutral- they are selected because they are supposed to anger, evoke empathy, and arouse mistrust of authority. Posts are filled with metaphors of struggle ("students were brutally beaten"), and silencing ("threatening students not to protest"), collective voice ("everyone must raise their voice"). Slogans like "Justice for Our Sister" and "Don't stay silent" are the rallying calls while the emotional language: *"Shameful," "disgusting," "alarming"*- puts the incident under the lens of moral emergency.

Based on the framing functions by Entman, the posts frame the incident in the following way:

- Problem: Institutional silencing and denial
- Blame: Directly assigned to the college, its guards and the political actors.
- Moral Evaluation: Systemic failure and injustice
- Solution: Persistent protest, exposure, and solidarity

Collective Pronouns and Moral Positioning

Activists continuously employ collective pronouns ("we", "our sister", "everyone") to create an ethical community, in contrast with "they", "them" – the college administration and authorities, therefore an out-group. This corresponds with Social Movement Theory, with activists being the good collective on the one hand and the corrupt 'other' on the other.

5.3 Multimodal Elements in Protest (RQ2)

5.3.1 Visual Symbolism (Blackout, Portraits)

Activist posts use protest videos, pictures of injured students, and portraits of victims with deliberately blurred facial features to represent the trauma and shame of a society. Vivid visual ingredients- police presence, confrontation, and student uniforms create emphasis and increase

emotional percussion. The modality is down-to-earth and rough without any superficial pretenses, enriching protest aesthetics. Vision-wise, the posts rely on high-contrast color schemes (black backgrounds, white/yellow text), emotionally-charged pictures (the college building, demonstrations, journalist portraits), and smart word bubbles to make the most of the impact. The layout is always centered with a dominance that makes sure that the message is clear and instant, even under a quick scroll. Hashtags act to connect each post to the wider movement with a feeling of digital solidarity and increased reach. And the use of bold font, direct quotation, and question mark helps to add immediacy and confrontation to the work, which makes the viewers involved emotionally and mentally.

5.3.2 Coordination of Hashtags, Color, and Layout

Hashtags such as #JusticeForPGCStudent and #PunjabCollege are accompanied by captions that express strong emotions and vivid visuals to form a united multimodal frame. Most often, the layout is symmetrical and designed in such a way that when both halves are used, the text is designed to ensure their immediate viewing and message clarity. This corresponds with Neumayer & Rossi's (2018) findings on the way protest imagery structures visibility

5.4 Institutional Framing and Credibility Narratives (RQ3)



The institutional posts use formal branding – logos, white backgrounds, professional typefaces – in order to exude authority. The tone is assertive in CM's statement (oriented towards law enforcement and punishment) and procedural in the college statement (oriented with what is visible and safe). Both evade direct interaction with what activists claim or protestor grievances and instead concentrate on dismissing "false claims" and emphasis on internal protocols.

5.4.2 Absences, Silences, and Denial Patterns

Both statements are characterized by remarkable absences. the victim's name is not given, no apology is made, and there are no recognitions of protestor grievances or systemic problems. The language is unemotional or defensive and both statements are made after large-scale mobilization of the public, which means a reactive rather than proactive communication strategy. Non-

transparent statements (“no such incident,” “false claims,” “no complaint has been filed”) make an attempt to shift the responsibility and reduce the attention paid to the actual situation, as van Dijk (1997) and Fairclough’s (1992) analysis of institutional discourse would suggest.

6. Discussion

Activist narratives when the incident took place at the Punjab College was a strong counter discourse, which directly contest institutional silence and denial with emotionally intense words, collective pronouns, and strategic hashtags. These posts relabeled the occurrence as symptoms of systematic injustice and created solidarity and outrage among the public. In comparison, institutional responses- especially from Punjab Group of Colleges and the Chief Minister-gave attention to the repair of image. Their statements were based on an employment of formal branding, procedural language, and denial that placed the crisis in the paradigm of misinformation rather than exploring the protestors' grievances or systemic problems.

The role of multimodality played a central role in the impact of the activists. Through combining protest videos and visuals, vivid pictures and symbolic visuals with resonating captions and hashtags, activists increased the urgency and spread the message further. This synergy created by text and image not only enhanced the resonance of the emotional component but also cultivated a feeling of community, which proves the peculiar strength of the multimodal discourse in the sphere of digital activism.

The struggle for control of digital narrative brought out both the promise and pitfall of activist opposition. Though activists were able to attract public attention and put pressure on institutional actors, official accounts took advantage of their authority and platform to reconceptualize the incident and squelch dissent. This process reflects global student protests, where digital sites become battlefronts for counter-narratives and activities of concerted action. As much as movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter demonstrate, the case of Punjab College illustrates the potential of multimodal and emotionally laden activism to break institutional silences, though even as organizations use state of the art image repair tactics, they are able to re-establish control.

7. Conclusion

This study shows how digital activism and the response of the institutions created the public narrative surrounding the incident of the Punjab College. Activist posts employed passionate language, we-related pronouns, and multimodal ways – combining protest images, videos and hashtags to develop a compelling counter-discourse. These posts constructed the event as systemic injustice, soliciting solidarity and accountability whilst uncovering institutional silencing and complicity.

On the other hand, the official statements were image repair by Punjab Group of Colleges and the Chief Minister. Their communications drew from formal branding, procedural language, and denial, confining the crisis to the problem of misinformation, and brushing off the activist grievances. This defense took priority in reputation over transparency or meaningful discourse.

The findings highlight the potency of multimodal protestation in boosting the representation of the members of the marginalized group and contesting institutional power on the electronic media. For educational establishments, the case reveals the dangers of containment and denial approach in crisis communication. Open, empathetic participation is

critical in sustaining trust and credibility in digital activism era.

This piece of research adds to multimodal and critical discourse studies by revealing how text, image, and layout work together to frame protest and institutional narratives. It also demonstrates the worth of bringing together framing theory, MDA, and social movement theory to explain complex digital controversies in non-Western settings.

Future studies should explore the ways through which such digital activism drive change in policy and examine platform specific dynamics and affect community views. Comparative studies in diverse cultural and institutional settings would continue to expand awareness on how digital activism and institutional processes develop in the global south.

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